

## Anthós (1990-1996)

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Volume 1 | Number 2

Article 11

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1991

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#### Recommended Citation

Parker, Sharon (1991) "The Phaedo: A Painting in Three Parts," *Anthós (1990-1996)*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 11.

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# THE PHAEDO : A PAINTING IN THREE PARTS

Sharon Parker

The *Phaedo* is a poignant dialogue which can be read many different ways. Some might hear it as a piece of music. I view it as a painting; a landscape in three parts. This triptych expresses a central unifying theme—that of the question of the immortality of the soul. With confident strokes of the brush, Plato guides the reader on a journey of ascent. In the first canvas the world of sensation is portrayed. The eye is led from this base, gradually upward, through knowledge in the second, to the summit of faith in the third. This climb leads the reader, in deliberate explicit steps, in ever upward movement from the corporeal world of sensation, through the relationship between body and soul, as proven by thought, to the highest pinnacle of the universal cosmos, which can only be approached through the purity of faith.

Although this dialogue makes note of a number of people, through the list provided by *Phaedo*, and Echecrates' use of the plural, only a few are allowed to speak. The others are shrouded in mist, and obscured from view. They have no part in the unfolding drama. This landscape, executed by Plato, is

given life through Phaedo's description as he recalls the composition. It addresses universal questions. These are life, or learning in order to remember, death, or the move into life, and the question of faith. The frame of each canvas both provides the containment of each work, but also acts as a bridge to the next. This frame holds the physical description of Socrates, a reference to the oracle, and a myth. The spirit, bound at daybreak, is unfettered at dusk.

This work, which ascends from the material to the spiritual realm, is a dialogue within a dialogue. The exchange between Echecrates and Phaedo displays the act of remembering. This, then, produces the dialogue between Socrates and Simmias, and Socrates and Cebes. It is interesting that both act as jurors judging the validity of his argument about the immortality of the soul. It is at the point that his argument fails to hold, and therefore dies, that Socrates engages in a dialogue with Phaedo. The apparently minor characters, Xanthippe, the jailer, and Crito, assist in carrying the images of the physical bound to the world of sensation, the mechanism of release, and the ascent of the soul. The dialogue begins with a prologue, moves through a series of speeches, briefly steps outside through an interlude, moves through another series of speeches, and finishes with an epilogue.

The prologue opens with questions posed by Echecrates to Phaedo. "Were you there...or did you hear about (Socrates execution) from someone also...what did he say...how did he meet his end?" Phaedo responds by relating the journey of the ship which Athens sends to Delos." It is ironic that this mission, pertains to the saving of the "youths and maidens" since Socrates' crime is that of corrupting the youth of Athens. Phaedo references the oracle, and then makes note of the length of time Socrates spent in prison prior to his execution. Echecrates has to ask several times for details before Phaedo is coaxed into providing the sought information. He begins the description through the world of sensation. In fact he uses the words "feel," "felt," or "feelings" seven times, and notes the experience of various types of feelings through his usage of the words "sorry," "happy," "fearlessly," "sorrow," "pleasure," "emotion," "pain," "affected," "laughing," and "crying." When pressed further for information by Echecrates, Phaedo again mentions the return of the

ship from Delos and then leads into the physical description of "Socrates just released from his chains." (Plato 41-3).

This reference back to the myth and the Delphic oracle provides the initial frame. The main topic to be addressed is raised—that of the immortality of the soul. This frame is further set by Socrates in his mention of *Aesop's Fables*, Cebes' reference to lyrics, and Apollo, and Socrates' notation of his dreams. While providing a reminder of the epic tradition, it also is the bridge that leads into the first canvass which depicts the realm of feeling/sensation. These references are markers in the ascent through this landscape. They note the move from one level to the next.

Socrates's first speech begins to take up the issues of the body, the "acquisition of knowledge," and the attainment of "truth" through reflection. He notes his own "journey," the "purification" of mind, and the "separation of the soul from the body." In this first set, Socrates offers the case for immortality by using the argument of reciprocity, recollection, and evidence of the relationship of the soul to the body. Simmias counters with the question of atonement. This is addressed through the uses of the metaphors of the "cloak" and the musical instrument. However the audience is not convinced (46-70).

In the interlude that follows Euthrates and Phaedo appear on the canvas. In this, the second of the triptych, Euthrates poses the following questions: "How can we believe...(what is the), proof...that when a man dies his soul does not die with him...(was the argument) rescue(d)." (70-1).

Phaedo's response to Euthrates provides a description of Socrates, "...he was much higher," and his invitation to Phaedo to join him in mourning the death of the argument, "...shall cut off (my hair) today, and you ought to do the same." The difficulty of the task ahead is referenced through Heracles, and the journey through the underworld "while the daylight lasts" is noted through the reference to Iolaus. This then provides secure placement into the second canvass and the ascent into the next level (71).

Cebes has brought up the question of durability "... (that) the entrance (of the soul) into the human body was, like a disease, the beginning of its destruction." Noting the difficulty involved in

addressing this question, Socrates moves into a discussion of "generation and destruction" and the theory of forms. (77-83).

After a brief return to Phaedo and Echecrates, who asks "How did the discussion go on?," the ascension into the last canvas of the triptych occurs. Socrates provides the myth of the earthly paradise and the destination of different types of souls. When pressed for an answer about his belief he states:

"No reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them...(however) we should use such accounts to inspire ourselves" (78, 94-5).

The dialogue moves back into a description of Socrates last moments and finishes with a reference to Asclepius, the god of healing.

The *Phaedo* has ascended from the corporeal, of the first canvas, to the body and soul of the second, to the ethereal of the third. From the broad brushstrokes to the fine line of detail, the viewer has been led from the base to the summit on a journey that takes place from sunrise to sunset. Socrates who is bound at the beginning is unfettered at the end as his soul takes flight. And the reader, like Crito, is left with Asclepius.